

The key to high performance in every field of endeavor is the ability to focus all our attention on the task at hand. To make fullest use of our capacities, we want to keep all distractions at bay and enter into a state of absorbed focus called the ‘flow state’.

However, most of our workplaces are far from conducive to sustained attention. Managing interruptions is a major challenge. You probably are well aware of this from personal experience, but here are some interesting facts:

- The average worker in an office is interrupted 4 times per hour – approximately once every 15 minutes.¹
- The average interruption lasts 6 minutes.²
- The average time required, after resuming a difficult task, to return to the same level of concentration is 15 minutes.³

Collectively, it is estimated that interruptions cause the US economy one-half trillion dollars per year.⁴ People who experience frequent interruptions have rates of exhaustion almost as great as the fatigue caused by work overload.⁵ And, interruptions of as little as 3 seconds double the error rate on the task being performed.⁶

A bit more than half of interruptions are incoming: people stopping by, telephone calls, email notifications or incoming texts. But almost as many “interruptions” are internally generated – people interrupting themselves of their own volition and switching to another task (including checking unrelated websites and social media).

INTERRUPTIONS BEFORE THEY OCCUR

This is a situation when “*an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.*”

There are a number of possible strategies:

Strategy #1. Set hours of availability and unavailability

Communicate these to colleagues. If you have a shared calendar, block out times as “**unavailable – working on _____.**” For those of you working in rapid response situations where you need to be available for fast-breaking events, create special forms of access for certain people to be used only in bona fide urgencies.

¹ study conducted by Market research firm uSamp

² <http://businessjournal.gallup.com/content/23146/too-many-interruptions-work.aspx>

³ <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324123004579057212505053076>

⁴ <http://www.threehourtransformation.com/getting-down-to-business/reduce-stress-at-work-by-managing-interruptions-and-distractions/>

⁵ International Journal of Stress Management

⁶ Journal of Experimental Psychology, "Momentary Interruptions Can Derail the Train of Thought"

Strategy #2. Don't answer the phone

Many of us are conditioned like Pavlov's dogs to jump for the phone at the sound. When the phone rings, stop and make a conscious choice whether or not you actually want to take a call right now. Caller ID is very helpful. It can be delightful simply to let the phone ring and enjoy it as the sound of your freedom. During your unavailable hours, just turn off the ringers.

Strategy #3. Close the door

A simple, low-tech solution that sends a clear message. (It can be enhanced by hanging a sign emphasizing your desire *not* to be interrupted.)

Strategy #4. Isolate yourself

For critical tasks such as writing and strategic thinking that require high focus, consider coming in to work early, "hiding" in an unused conference room, or working from home.

Strategy #5. Save it for the meeting

Schedule regular check-ins with people you interact with most closely. Make it a practice for everyone to keep a running list and bring it to the meeting rather than calling, dropping by or emailing with non-time-sensitive items.

Strategy #6. Prioritize communications

Develop a system within your organization for prioritizing communications.

For example, code all emails and texts red/yellow/green:

red = urgent: work cannot move forward without your response; respond asap
yellow = medium priority: respond with 24 hrs
green = low urgency; respond when you can

Strategy #7. Manage the biggest single source of interruptions – yourself

Schedule unbroken and uninterrupted blocks of time for projects requiring high focus. Don't be a slave to your inbox. Productivity experts all agree that you should turn off email notifications and block out specific times to look at your inbox. Get help managing your addictions to particular websites (facebook, news sources, games, etc.) by using tools like LeechBlock that temporarily block access.

MANAGING INTERRUPTIONS ONCE THEY OCCUR

The key here is to be accountable to your priorities and see drop-in visitors and calls as a choice.

Strategy #1. Reschedule

Have a couple of stock phrases ready.

“This isn’t a good time for me. Could we reschedule?”

“Sorry, but I’m working on _____. Could we reschedule?”

The introductory phrase can be as charming and disarming as you choose.

But the key words are always: *“Let’s reschedule.”*

(Unless you want to adopt Strategy #2...)

Strategy #2. Delegate/redirect

This removes the need to have another meeting or call.

“I think it would be better if you spoke with _____ about this.”

Strategy #3. Minimize

When, for whatever reason, Strategies #1 and #2 are inappropriate, set time limits and clarify expectations right at the beginning.

“Great. But I do need to get back to _____. Can we limit this to 10 minutes and reschedule if we need more time?”

Make sure to keep the visit or call focused on the goals. Use time efficiently.

If you really want to keep a drop-in visit short, consider talking while standing up.

IN CONCLUSION

Take charge of your physical and mental workspace!

Your attention and focus are some of your most valuable assets.

Care for them wisely.